

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Mundane objects in the city: Laundry practices and the making and remaking of public/private sociality and space in London and New York

### Journal Item

#### How to cite:

Watson, Sophie (2015). Mundane objects in the city: Laundry practices and the making and remaking of public/private sociality and space in London and New York. *Urban Studies*, 52(5) pp. 876–890.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2014 Urban Studies Journal Limited

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/0042098014531630>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)



**Mundane objects in the city: laundry practices and the making and remaking of public/private sociality and space in London and New York.**

Journal:	<i>Urban Studies</i>
Manuscript ID:	CUS-838-13-11.R1
Manuscript Type:	Article
<b>Discipline: Please select a keyword from the following list that best describes the discipline used in your paper.:	Sociology
World Region: Please select the region(s) that best reflect the focus of your paper. Names of individual countries, cities & economic groupings should appear in the title where appropriate.:	Western Europe, North America
Major Topic: Please identify up to two topics that best identify the subject of your article.:	Community, Other
Please supply a further 5 relevant keywords in the fields below.:	Public space public realm, Everyday life in the city, laundry, London, New York

SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts

Mundane objects in the city: laundry practices and the making and remaking of public/private sociality and space in London and New York.

**Abstract:** The paper considers how shifting laundry practices and technologies associated with dirty washing have over time summoned different spaces, socialities and socio-spatial assemblages in the city, enrolling different actors and multiple publics and constituting different associations, networks and relations in its wake as it travels from the home and back again. It argues that rather than being an inert object of unpleasant matter, whose encounter with humans has been largely restricted to certain categories of person for its transformation to re-use, and thus passed unnoticed, the paper explores how laundry practices have figured in producing and reproducing gendered (and classed) relations of labour, and enacting multiple socio-spatial, and gendered, relations and assemblages in the city, which have largely gone unnoticed in accounts of everyday urban life.

**Keywords:** Public space public realm, Everyday life in the city, laundry, London, New York

That cities are spaces of social interaction, diversity and encounters with difference is now well understood (Young, 1990, Fincher and Jacobs 1998). Over time there has even been a shift in focus from the Habermasian public realm of the coffee house, through to the Richard Rogers idealised notion of the piazza as a space of democracy, to the public spaces of the edge, the boundaries, the margins or even the more liminal, symbolic or less visible public spaces of the city, where multiple publics are formed and re- formed (Sennett, 1990, 2010; Watson, 2006). As cities become more and more unequal, with the rich having access to privatised spaces of consumption and pleasure, the significance of public space as a space of conviviality, inclusion, and possibility becomes ever more salient. Yet with cuts in expenditure on public infrastructures and provisions, public spaces are increasingly under threat, while at the same time, spaces for encounters across difference are dramatically eroded as different populations, rich and poor, White and Black, are consigned to different parts of the city to live and work (or not).

In much of this discussion of the public realm and public space though, the city is dematerialized, it has no physical substance or solidity; rather it appears as a container, where matter, objects and infrastructural elements are ‘blackboxed’ into invisible infrastructure. This has been challenged from a number of directions, from Swyngedouw’s (2006) and Kaika’s (2005) attention to the technological and ‘natural’ governance of the city to the socio-material view of publics which foregrounds the constitutive role that different objects and materials play in making up, separating, allowing and limiting different publics- which themselves are seen as heterogeneous assemblages of materials, actors, technological elements and discourses (Marres and Lezaun, 2011, Farias and Bender 2009). Besides interests in urban networks and large infrastructures (Graham and Marvin, 2001; Coutard and Guy, 2007; Gandy, 2002), some Science and Technology Studies (STS) researchers have explicitly focused on the “everydayness” of cities (Amin and Thrift, 2002) and insisted on the multitude of material objects that participate in the day-to-day shaping of urban areas (Latour and Hermant, 1998) and that constitute a “non-human urban ecology” (Farias and Bender, 2010; Denis and Pontille, 2010).

But there is another set of stories to tell about the making and unmaking of publics, politics, and encounters, stories which derive from mundane objects and sites in the city which enrol actors and connections in less obvious ways, but which are equally

important in thinking about public spaces, urban spatialities and socialities. Molotch's research on turnstiles (2010) and edited collection on public toilets (with Noren 2011) illustrates well the purchase of these lines of enquiry exposing the politics and making of publics enabled by these street objects, while Marres and Lezaun (2011) and others in a special issue of *Economy and Society* have explored how materials and devices have mobilized public participation and engagement.

What has received less attention are those mundane domestic objects- particularly those associated with the body- which in various ways and at various times move out of the home and animate an assemblage of multiple spatial forms and socialities in the city, that go largely unnoticed in our accounts. One explanation for this lies in our sense of disgust at body effluent and waste, the 'simple logic of excluding filth' or expelling things that are seen as abject (Kristeva, 1982), or our need to exclude uncleanness to maintain boundaries (Douglas, 1988, p.41), or in an implicitly racialised notion of dirt as dangerous (Sibley, 1995). My argument here is that the very invisibility of these processes also lies in their gendered nature. My matter of concern here is dirty washing- probably one of the most mundane objects of all. This is not to say that there have not been fascinating and excellent accounts of the history of laundry and the gendered nature of laundry practices, often by feminist scholars (Shove, 2003; Mohun, 1999).

But the notion that the unimaginably large amounts of laundry produced in cities, from the clothes and sheets of private homes, to the table ware, towels and bed linen of hotels, might have an impact of city life, public space and sociality, has passed largely unnoticed. Funnily enough, the processes associated with the management of the other major effluent of the body- arguably even more abject and potentially provocative of disgust- urine and shit – has been widely researched and explored (Gandy, 1999; MacFarlane et al. forthcoming; Molotch, 2010), perhaps because this calls into play complex technical infrastructures and the hard stuff of the city, the 'serious' stuff, perhaps because it is 'sexy' to talk of really dirty things (the stuff of swear words), or perhaps because this is not intrinsically the affair of women (which isn't to say that these authors ignore the gendered dimensions of sanitation and toilets in their work). The fact that changing washing technologies and practices have rarely been constituted as a matter of concern by urbanists, despite their centrality to everyday life in the city, reflects the lack of importance paid to largely feminized domestic activity, a point consistently raised in feminist work on gendered divisions of labour over several decades (Beechey, 1979; Oakley, 1972; Barrett, 1980). It is no coincidence that the idiom 'airing your dirty laundry in public' - is deployed to describe revealing aspects of your private life that should remain secret.

The paper considers how shifting laundry practices and technologies associated with this mundane object have over time summoned different spaces, socialities and socio-spatial assemblages in the city, enrolling different actors and multiple publics and constituting different associations, networks and relations in its wake as it travels from the home and back again. It does so in two parts. First, it looks at the laundry practices of individuals and families enacted both in, or near, the home. Second it follows laundry from these proximate sites to the commercial laundries scattered across city. The shifts and changes in washing practices, enabled by mechanisation- itself a reflection of changing labour patterns and costs, have shaped and reshaped public/ private boundaries in the city, as well as impacting on high streets and suburban areas where these activities have been concentrated.

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

The research was conducted during 2012/3. This article draws on interviews with owners of launderettes in Camden, London, (and as a minor point of comparison, Manhattan, NYC), users of laundrettes/laundromats, key players in the commercial laundry sector in London and the Guild of Cleaners and Launderers and the Worshipful Society of Launderers, a planner and an archivist at the Peabody Association, secondary sources and archives, and participant observation in laundries/laundromats at different times of the day in London and New York. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the observation periods a diary was used to record the socio-demographic characteristics of the users, conversations held, and social interactions. First, a caveat, this paper was based on research in two cities of the Global North, where washing and laundry practices bear little comparison with cities of the Global South, where the luxury of plentiful water supply, and the widespread current use of domestic washing machines, is the privilege of but a few (Gender and Water Alliance, 2003). Instead washing is largely a public affair, where water is available at streams, rivers, wells and pumps, with contrasting configurations of public/private and gender relations. To do this comparison justice would require extensive research and a different paper.

‘Private ‘ Laundry – from the home to the streets and back again.

Domestic clothes and linen washing practices in Europe and USA over the last century or more have taken a variety of forms articulating different gender/class/ethnic relations and private/ public spaces as technical innovations in the industry changed. For women in wealthier households in the early twentieth century, and for some even later, dirty washing magically returned clean from hours of the hidden labour of domestic servants or washer women in private homes who earned around 3s a week, with enhanced earning power of 3s a week if they were in possession of a mangle power (Mayhew, 1861, Vol 3, p.306). Laundry practices also took a more visible form; where a stream or river was close by, the women took the washing there gathering with others in a communal form of employment (Sidbury, 1997) resembling contemporary practices in much of the Global South. Essential materials for washing at home included a tub of hot water, a washboard- initially constructed of wood and later fabricated in metal, and a bar of laundry soap, or a dolly tub with a dolly stick (like a peg) to stir the washing, and a mangle or wringer. Limited supplies of soap meant economies of use, at least until the latter part of the nineteenth century (Old and Interesting, 2013), and everyday linen might only be washed with ash lye, especially in poorer households and was typically performed by women. By the early twentieth century mass-produced tongs replaced sticks, and wet washing moved from public to more private, but still visible, sites to dry as clotheslines and pegs in back yards and gardens took the place of drying on trees, banks and bushes. Photographs and paintings of the growing industrial cities are littered with fluttering lines of washing (insert photograph 1).

The mechanisation of the industry from the latter 1900s had a profound impact on both domestic life and city spaces. Mechanisation came late to the laundry industry (arguably due to its gendering), shifting from a cottage industry to the power laundry between 1870 and 1914, as steam power and the commercial development of steam heated flat work machinery and mechanical rotary washers enabled large quantities of washing to be undertaken at the same time (Goodliffe and Temperley, 2009, p. 5). This shift of domestic and local laundry practices, to the commercial laundry, largely the privilege of the higher income classes, had distinct social and spatial effects on

the city as we see below, providing new sites of sociality and conviviality for the laundry workers, and in the case of the US, new racialised labour relations.

But for poorer households, dirty washing and its associated practices, remained closer to home particularly in the public and philanthropic housing sectors in London, from the turn of the century. In response to growing concerns about the sanitation, cleanliness and public hygiene of the urban poor (Cox, 2008), the Public Baths and Wash Houses Act of 1846 in the UK legislated for the provision of public baths and laundries by local parishes and many of these were built over the following 50 years (and remained as an essential public service until the latter part of the twentieth century). In the early 20th century, many Londoners lived in crowded courts with no internal water supply, and right up to the late 1930s, shared standpipes and outside lavatories were common. Even when water was piped to a house, there was often only one tap in a scullery, shared by all tenants (Museum of London, 2013). Public baths and washhouses provided hot water and laundry facilities, where the washhouse supplied large tubs for washing clothes, as well as mangles and driers, and these became important sites of sociality for women as they carried out the family's laundry. (<http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Collections-Research/Research/Your-Research/X20L/Themes/1382/1202/>). By the twentieth century power driven washing machines began to replace the old washing tubs. According to one George Hargreaves who worked with Bradford and Tullis - the main suppliers of washing machines to local authority laundries, the public washhouses 'were, in effect, the original launderettes' (Goodliffe and Temperley, 2009, p. 89).

Even closer to home, laundries were constructed as an integral part of public and philanthropic housing developments. The first Peabody Estates, which opened in 1864, were built with communal facilities including shared sinks and WCs on landings, and bathhouses and laundry blocks with washing tubs and drying cupboards. There were 3 designs for the laundries (interview with Peabody Archivist)- an outside block, a laundry across the whole of the top floor serving 22-23 flats, and partly open to the elements for drying purposes or one on each floor containing tubs and drying cupboards (Photo 2) for the flats there to share. Similar accounts are given as to the significance of these communal facilities for women's sociality. According to the Peabody Archivist, after modernization of the blocks during the 1950s- 70s, despite appreciating the self-contained facilities- many of the tenants described missing the contact with their neighbours.

#### The Rise of the Launderette.

At the end of the Second World War the importation of the coin- operated washing machine from the US summoned new gendered socio- spatial relations and a new urban landscape into play. A prevailing emphasis on the nuclear family and pressure on women to create the perfect domestic suburban home (Wilson, 1980 Friedan, 1963) after six years of relative freedom from domestic drudgery during the war, created a fertile environment for the American based company Bendix to import the coin operated machine. The first launderette in the UK was launched in Queensway, London in 1946, and was an immediate success attracting 800 customers in the first five weeks (Bloom, 1988, p.14).

Bendix Company, who held the initial monopoly in the industry in the UK,

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

controlled their expansion through the 1950s ensuring that each launderette was only one mile apart (Goodliffe and Temperley, 2010, p.89). By the mid 1950s launderettes had received widespread acceptance and 500 coin -operated launderettes, now also supplied by other manufacturers such as Westinghouse and Whirlpool, were to be found across the UK. The changing technology and ease of access to local launderettes was accompanied by shifting attitudes to the washing. Addressing the 1958 Annual Conference of the Institute of British Launderers, the Director asserted: ' Not so long ago there was considerable pressure on the housewife to do the same as her neighbour; and to send all her household articles to the laundry. Certainly...she would not wish to hang her washing out on the line for all to see. But nowadays all that has changed and I cannot think of anywhere ... where washing cannot be seen hanging out, and where the housewife is bothered in the least in seeing it hanging there, indeed one even sees it in the better class districts, and on Sundays as well!' (Ibid, p. 90).

The rapid rise of the coin operated laundry-the launderette- mobilised a new set of socio- spatial and economic relations in towns and cities. Washing, hitherto a relatively privatized activity- consigned to the home (or close by) or commercial laundries, and invisible like much of women's work, takes on a public face, marking the high street with its presence. On virtually every city street, at any time of the day, a group of mainly women could be found sitting by a washing machine, rubbing along in the same space in casual encounters (Watson, 2006) or engaging which each other or the manager in animated conversation. At the same time, investment in launderettes provided a new form of small business investment - 1500 were owned by single family units in Britain in 1968, and were particularly popular in industrial areas with 3 shift working hours (Mitchell, 1963, p. 7). By 1975 a peak had been reached of 8400 units across the UK. Such were their success that the new industry engaged in continuous processes of refurbishment and modernisation (a point reiterated in the interviews with current self service and commercial laundry owners), as illustrated in an Industry manual in 1963: 'Many came into being in the 50s- their design at the time seemed modern and up to date- just like the coffee bar. But just like the coffee bar of 1953 with its fake rubber plants, bamboo screens and Spanish bull - fighter posters, looks tatty and old fashioned in 1963 so some of the original self- service laundries with their simple damp -wash service, their tungsten light fittings and their utility décor now appear thoroughly "old-hat"' (Mitchell, 1963, p. 56). From this writer's perspective diversification and innovation were far more common in the US, where launderers had introduced shoe repairs and even beauty parlours and coffee shops into the site- a far cry from the 'one man launderette business in a British high street, with its 12 year old machines, mouldering paintwork, fly blown posters and an elusive stench of old clothes' (ibid, p.60).

My argument here is that not only did launderettes shift a gendered activity from the home to the street, which enabled the potential de- gendering of the practice as private chores became public- they also constituted a new form of public space in towns and cities. Launderettes notoriously were spaces of interaction, with shifting populations, atmospheres and intensities from day to night as students and single people, replaced the largely female or older populations of daylight hours. Though not typically recognised as such, these were quasi public spaces of previously domestically performed work, which through the emergence of the coin operated washing machine and tumble drier, and associated time needed for the task to be

performed, assembled washers in casual relations of sociality and encounter. Several of the interviews with customers and owners nostalgically referred to the hours they passed in the launderette during their hey day: For example, a British African woman in her 40s (laundry interview 12.10. 2012 Camden) referred to spending hours as a child in the local laundry where she played by the machines while her mother conversed with other women doing the household wash there.

So significant were these spaces of imagined possibility and encounter, often sexually inscribed, that they found their way into numerous instances of popular culture, from the song by the Detergents in 1963 '*Leader of the Laundromat*' (a parody on the Shangri Las song '*Leader of the pack*'), and *Coin Laundry* - a song performed and written by Australian singer-songwriter Lisa Mitchell about finding love at the coin laundry, to the launderette in *East Enders* which was a central focus of life in the community. The launderette didn't just feature in songs and soaps, in 1985 Levi's launched a now famous advertisement where a sexy young man exhibiting retro chic walks into a launderette to the lyrics of Marvin Gaye's '*Through the Grapevine*' removes his Ray Ban sunglasses, casts an alluring gaze at the other customers, and seductively takes off his jeans and places them in the washing machine, apparently leading to a 20 fold increase in sales figures of 501 jeans in Britain. As Sir John Hegarty, the creative brain behind the ad later described the ad: 'We wanted an egalitarian environment, somewhere you would find almost anyone, and the launderette had that' (Khan, 2010). While the more cosy or parodic representations of everyday life in the launderette were given a further twist in the British film *My Beautiful Launderette* - a 1985 British comedy-drama film based on a screenplay by Hanif Kureishi, which depicts the reunion and eventual romance between Omar, a young Pakistani man living in London, and his old friend, a street punk named Johnny, tackling homosexuality and racism during the dark days of Thatcher's Britain.

By the mid 1980s, the growing affordability of washing machines and tumble driers signalled the gradual demise of the launderette as a commonplace feature of the British high street. According to the National Association of the Launderette Industry (NALI website), numbers in the UK peaked at 12,500 in the early 80s dwindling by 2012 to 3,000 across the UK. Unlike the earlier shift of washing from private to public or commercial space, this shift did not derive from technological change. Rather it reflected the new prevalence of this mundane domestic object, the washing machine, in the domestic sphere, as purchase costs diminished, on the one hand, and repair costs for launderette washing machines increased on the other. The move of the machine into the home was also entangled with changing gender relations, as more women entered the workforce full time (militating against regular visits to the launderette), and new expectations of cleanliness meant at least two to three family washes per week. For Pink (2007) domestic laundry practices also constituted a route to satisfy a 'quest to create a home and gendered self they [women] believe is morally satisfactory. Cowan (1983) similarly saw domestic laundry as reflecting an enduring commitment to the preservation of practices regarded central to family life. The penetration of the home by washing machines was firmly in place by 2003 when Shove (2003, p. 117) found that the average British washing machines were used 274 times annually (392 cycles in the US) and washing machine ownership had reached 98% of all households (92% in the US). As Shove argues, domestic laundry practices are continually framed by typologies and classificatory frameworks creating new habits, as systems are held together through



the coordination of materials and meanings by the people who carry out the washing (p.140-1). The space of the public launderette, of shared machines and facilities, I suggest, affords lesser potential for such re-scripted practices.

Launderettes in public and social housing estates also went into severe decline over the latter decades of the twentieth century, as increasingly these spaces had become neglected and vandalized, leading to the installation of surveillance cameras, and the infrequent use of machines as tenants took their custom elsewhere or installed washing machines in their flats. This public shared space for low-income tenants now long gone, has more recently been adapted for other uses. In Southwark for example, on the Kingswood Estate the council have adopted a strategy of converting the old laundries to create new homes. Councillor Ian Wingfield, cabinet member for housing said, "This is a brilliant, innovative scheme...(which) literally creates space for homes from nothing. It's difficult to believe that what were such dingy, unused spaces have been transformed into such bright new flats, which will very soon be let to tenants"

([http://www.southwark.gov.uk/news/article/161/from\\_filthy\\_laundries\\_to\\_fresh\\_new\\_hidden\\_homes](http://www.southwark.gov.uk/news/article/161/from_filthy_laundries_to_fresh_new_hidden_homes)). This demise of the high street launderette in the UK is nevertheless a spatially differentiated phenomenon, with launderettes still in evidence in medium/ high-density areas dominated by low income or student housing.

All of the 10 UK launderettes investigated for this study were owned or managed by first or second - generation migrants from Asian or Middle Eastern countries, who saw the business as a good source of income and investment. The owner of M R laundry (interview 02.07. 2017) reported consistent profits of £2,500 per calendar month, while successful business was dependent on a high concentration of local students or travellers (as at C S laundry Interview 16.07.2012), and investment in new machines and cleanliness. As the owner of S P Laundry (interview 16.07. 2012) emphasized, when he took over the laundry 10 years ago the place was run down and everything had to be replaced. This offered a stark contrast to the laundry on K T Road which was so dilapidated and dirty that the consumer (whose machine at home had broken down) interviewed there (18.07.2012) complained: *'I wouldn't come back- very dirty- machines broken ...here I would worry about my washing being stolen- I don't trust this area- I wouldn't leave it in here. Homeless people would steal my stuff- it's a good way to get clean clothes...the machine has been kicked in here. They should upgrade this place. The guy who runs it is not friendly at all'*. Others succeeded through diversification of services, the provision of dry cleaning, ironing, mending, or, as at M R laundry, the sale of Indian fabrics and dressmaking (photo 3).

Though these laundrettes remain in some city spaces, it appears they no longer represent a site of sociality and encounter, with the growing practice of service washes and bag drop offs. Where customers stayed they sat with laptops or magazines, while doing their wash, and the only form of sociality I observed was between customers and laundry owners who engaged in familiar banter with regular users. The specificity of laundrette use was confirmed by John Trapp, owner of Associated Liver Launderettes in Liverpool, the UK's largest chain (Kahn, 2010), who claimed that launderettes now have a polarised customer base:

"We have people at both ends of the scale, from newly arrived immigrants with no

access to hot water in their properties, to busy working couples who might have a machine at home, but just don't have time and prefer to have a service wash. Then there is the one thing that everyone owns that none of us can wash at home - a duvet. That brings most people to a launderette at least twice a year'.

Despite the widespread scepticism, shared by the Martin Chief Executive of the Launderers' Guild, and Daniel the owner of Blossom and Brown (interviews, July 2012, January, 2013), as to the continuing viability of the high street launderette, there are scattered attempts across the UK to revive launderettes as opportunities for social enterprise or a community hub. The Hilton Street Launderette in Manchester's northern quarter, for example, houses high-speed computers alongside washing machines, and provides coffee and sofas, to attract those who want to play games or watch films online while waiting for their load. While also in Manchester at the Clean Machine on Withington Road, during the summer of 2010 the launderette was transformed into an art gallery for a new exhibition by a local artist (Britton, 2010, p.2).

New York launderettes- laundromats in the local idiom- offered a distinct contrast, not least in their abundance due to high land values and the dominance of apartment housing where restricted space, money or regulations limit the prevalence of domestic washing machines. 12 laundries were visited in mid town Manhattan and the lower East Side in November 2012, the majority of which are still managed by Chinese families. Here the majority of laundromats perform bag wash, and customers express strong affect with respect to their quality with reams of posts on web sites. For example, with reference to Jane Laundromat at 50 80<sup>th</sup> Avenue, during the research period there were 22 reviews including (sometimes racialised) comments like: 'I picked up my laundry with trepidation ...No weird stains! No holes, no grey whites! I was dumbfounded..I love these guys with the unreserved affection I have for smiling, friendly Chinese owned-family run businesses'. While at Tin Tin on the Lower East Side (20 reviews posted during the research period), one customer posted: 'I put up with this place for a while because.. I don't have a W/D in my apartment building. They ruined two Patagonia jackets of mine. Burnt one in the drier so that the entire outside of the jacket is..all charred/singed. The second I have no idea what they did'.

Self service Laundromats in New York are organized around the concept of wash and fold (photo 4), where large wooden boards for folding occupy the central space, at which customers stand in silence folding their washing while watching large screen televisions overhead. These were bustling places on each of the site visits, but sociality was at a minimum, with no chairs or space for sitting down during the wash. One laundry manager explained the lack of seats as a device for excluding the homeless. Despite this, web posts suggested a high level of emotional investment in these local sites of domestic reproduction. A local NY journalist (Moore, 2012) described her experience thus: 'I live right down the street from the Laundromat but like everything in New York, going there means competing with everyone else for the washer. It means there are 25 washers in the joint but only 5 of them work at any one time..it means figuring out the timeframe when the number of people in there will be the lowest..it means not making eye contact with people as they are putting their dirty underwear into the wash..by the way how weird is it to fold your clothes in front of a group of strangers? You watch people fold their stuff secretly judging

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

their character on the basis of their underwear’. Starkly reflected in these comments is the ambivalent affect associated with making public intimate bodily matters.

What I have suggested so far is that how clothes get washed is by far from a trivial affair. Rather, laundry practices of the household and the enactment of domestic tasks that both shape and reproduce bodies on a daily basis and summon specific socio-spatial assemblages in the city, have been rather absent from our accounts of everyday urban life. I have suggested that the relative invisibility of these practices, and lack of attention to their urban effects, lies both in their gendered nature, and in the disgust or embarrassment we feel about dirty products that issue from, or are associated with, bodies. Though several scholars, especially feminist scholars, have provided engaging accounts of laundry as gendered work or as implicated in consumption activities, on the one hand, or of the changing technologies of laundry practices since the mid nineteenth century on the other, the socio-spatialities of laundry work have gone unnoticed. What should by now be clear is that laundry practices have had changing social and spatial effects in London and New York. I turn now to the commercial laundries, which represent the most public face of dirty washing and its transformation into clean objects.

Commercial laundry- dirty washing goes public.

The advent of the steam - powered laundry in the mid 1850s had a profound effect on the urban landscape of the industrialising cities. Laundry collection, by horse drawn carriages followed by motor powered vans, became an increasingly visible part of everyday life in towns. As Bell (1900, p.10) described the trade:

‘Considering how the laundry trade has grown of late years by leaps and bounds, it would be a difficult matter to find a town, however small, worth of the name without a steam laundry, and the very first and most important outside consideration is a good horse and smart van. This should not be gaudy, but neat, for instance, a black or chocolate ground and gold letters, or a cream ground and crimson letters, or electric blue ground and deliver letters.... The chief point with regard to him (a smart man in livery) is a good character for sobriety and honesty.’

Laundry buildings, containing large machinery for washing and drying, were striking features of the built environment, typically on the edge of cities, while over a dozen laundry machine manufacturers sprang up across the UK (Goodliffe and Temperley, 2009, p.4). Social shifts intersected with technological and material shifts as the growing middle class in cities sent their washing to the power laundry. High levels of set up capital required local investment, but dividends were good, and local wealthy individuals saw them as a good speculative risk. As the prospectus for the Crouch Hill Sanitary Laundry Limited near Sherbourne pointed out: ‘The profitable character of well-conducted Steam Laundries is well known, and careful enquiry into the returns of these undertakings shows that as the work extends the proportion of profit is increased. It should be borne in mind by intending investors that they will not only have the advantage of their washing being efficiently done, but also that the cost will be materially reduced by the handsome dividend anticipated upon the shares held in the Company’ (ibid, p.10).

Over the following decades the number of commercial laundries increased across British towns and cities, predominantly located in suburban areas. Not only were cities visibly reshaped by the physical infrastructure and transportation practices

resulting from this growth, so also new opportunities emerged for sociality in public space, not now in the washing houses or streams of the earlier period, but in the spaces of work associated with the trade as I discuss below. As a place of employment, laundry remained women's work being considered too demeaning for men, though with the growth of the power laundries a recalibration of gender relations emerged, as men took over the ownership and management of laundries (Mohun, 1999), and involved themselves in the more specialized mechanical parts of the work. Driving the vans became an entirely male preserve (see Photo 5), with photographs from the time showing men dresses in smart uniforms donned in brass buttons standing proudly by their vans. In the US, race added another dimension, where steam laundries across the cities and towns of America were operated by Chinese men from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with a further gendered and racialised shift as changing technologies recast the industry as mechanical, scientific and manlike, and white male power laundry owners competed with the Chinese steam laundry men to assert their authority and superiority (Wang, 2002, p.54).

The use of commercial laundries in London by middle and higher income households remained widespread through to the 1960s with laundry vans collecting or delivering laundry boxes a constant marker of wealth in the better off residential areas of cities, freeing housewives from this aspect of domestic drudgery. From the start of that decade their use by private households went into sharp decline precipitated by three factors. The first reflected the intersections of urban/rural life in unexpected ways. Typically higher income households in country areas delivered hampers containing the bed linen, towels and tablecloths to the local station to be dispatched to the laundries in towns and cities by train on a weekly basis. In 1963 the Beeching report (Beeching, 1963) aimed at restructuring the British railways, identified 2,363 stations and 5,000 miles of railway line for closure, representing 55% of all stations and 30% of route miles, with the stated objective of stemming the large financial losses incurred during a period of increasing competition from road transport. According to Martin of the Guild of Cleaners and Launderers (interview 18.07.2012) the reduction of the rail system had a considerable impact on laundries, which combined with the availability of cheaper domestic technology, and changing expectations around women's work to reduce their use. The family run organisation of the industry and their location on the edge of towns- in London the Ealing area was known as 'soap suds island' represented further factors in their demise. As towns and cities expanded from the 1950s -1970s the children or grandchildren of the original owners saw profits to be made in selling the sites for residential development (Martin, interview)- often now the sites of suburban housing estates and gated communities.

Commercial laundry work associated individuals and families has become extremely niche, essentially the preserve of A and B households living in the richer boroughs of central London- Mayfair and Central London, or country towns like Cheltenham. Blossom and Brown in Upton East London, which took over Sycamore, a company which has held the royal warrant for 200 years (they proudly showed me the Windsor and Spenser house hampers on my site visit) (photo 6), is the most exclusive of the London laundries catering to the domestic sphere. Daniel (interview 14.0 .2013) whose family had owned the business over many generations described current practices and clients thus:

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

*‘we became the only person doing private people in old laundry boxes and hampers- like the old ones. Going forward there will always be a niche- Mayfair, Kensington. My generation never knew what it is like to have your sheets laundered- whereas my parents all of them did this- sent their laundry off in black boxes with white writing – Sycamore - on it- very common then- people inherited linens- fabrics different in those days - good quality- it would last a life time- at the laundry it came back all nice and crisp- now rubbish quality wise- disposable items- throw them away- demand changes....People have dailies who iron for them- cheaper. ... Old days we had gentlemen’s handkerchiefs and socks- not coming through now’. 30% of their trade has remained in this sector, where washing (mainly bed linen, table cloths and towels) is collected by their vans- still embossed with the old logo and dropped back a week later (photo 7). At the same time new material forms assemble new washing practices. As Daniel pointed out, duvets have replaced the need for sheets, and can be made attractive as they are filled and have body, such that they cannot become easily creased. Duvet covers are also, he explained, not amenable to being washed in a commercial laundry, since the buttons and bordering militate against ironing or finishing through the large flat ironers. For Daniel the importance of high quality, well finished and packaged in hampers and cases- *‘how items are presented marks the distinction between good and bad laundries’*, and of diversification and innovation to keep the business viable was very clear.*

With the demise of the domestic laundry sector, the proportion of laundry work for the service sector and industry has come to represent the majority of laundry work. Hotels, restaurants, hospitals, healthcare and other public services generate huge quantities of laundry, which is undertaken at a range of commercial laundries from large laundry groups such as Sunlight laundry to small enterprises across the country. Founded in Fulham, West London in 1900 as Sunlight Laundry, like many other companies originally supplied domestic laundry services across the metropolis. It merged with another company in 1928, expanding nationally, to change direction in 1963 with the rise of the domestic washing machine and the development of easy to iron fabrics, diversifying to launder and rent linen for the catering and hotel industries. Recalibrating the urban landscape once again, high urban land costs have forced this industry, where space is essential, to outer city areas. Sunlight headquarters are now located in a business park near Basingstoke. A similar trajectory has occurred for all the surviving laundries though often on a smaller scale.

Conclusion.

Rather than being an inert object of unpleasant matter, whose encounter with humans has been largely restricted to certain categories of person (poorer, female, or – in NY- Chinese) for its transformation to re-use, and thus passed unnoticed, what I have attempted to show instead is dirty washing’s vibrant role in making shifting socio-spatial relations in the city. What we have seen is that laundry practices have figured in producing and reproducing gendered relations of labour, at home and away from the home- which have also been imbricated in distinctive relations of class, and have had distinctive social and spatial effects.

Doing the laundry has shaped and reshaped public/ private boundaries shifting from privatised work in the home to the social spaces of the early wash houses, public laundries of the philanthropic and social housing estates, or later, of the launderette.

As a private object made public through commercial laundry practices it became visible in the city in a different way, first in the commercial laundries scattered across the cities, and in its circulation in laundry vans on a daily basis, and later as a commonplace site in the laundrettes of city high streets and in local neighbourhoods. As washing machines and tumble driers became more affordable, laundry practices once again departed the public sphere, re-privatised in the home, with the 'public laundry' of the service sectors, and the laundry of the minority upper classes, remaining the only dirty washing to move through the city to the remaining commercial laundries on the fringes of cities out of sight. In conclusion then, this mundane object has had a mobile and shifting history enacting multiple socio-spatial, and gendered, relations and assemblages in the city, which have largely gone unnoticed in accounts of everyday urban life. In exploring the travels of dirty washing and the lives it makes up, this article has added to the growing literatures which explore how material objects, and the practices associated with them, enact social and public spaces in the city.

### Acknowledgements

With thanks to the incisive comments of the reviewers, and to Russell Hay, not only for doing some of the laundry, but also for drawing attention to its fascinating presence as a mundane urban object. Thanks also to my colleagues who were part of the Mundane Objects in Public Space project - particularly Simon Carter, Francis Dodsworth, Harvey Molotch, Evelyn Ruppert, Olga Sezneva - for our fruitful discussions and exchanges on which this article draws.

### Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### References

- Amin, A. and Thrift, N. (2002) *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* Cambridge, Polity.
- Barrett, M. (1980) *Women's Oppression Today Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*. London Verso
- Beeching, R. (1963) *The Reshaping of British Railways* British Railways Board.
- Beechey, V. (1979) On Patriarchy *Feminist Review* 3, pp. 66–82
- Bell, A. (1900) *The Steam Laundry with which is incorporated Laundry Wrinkles and Recipes* London: Laundry Journal Office.
- Bloom, S. (1988) *The Launderette: a history* London ; Duckworth

1  
2  
3 Britton, P. (2010) Painter's exhibition in his local launderette Manchester *Evening News*  
4 June 1, 2010 p.2  
5  
6  
7  
8 Coutard, O., Guy, S. (2007) 'STS and the City: Politics and Practices of Hope. Science',  
9 *Technology & Human Values* 32, pp. 713–34.  
10  
11 Cowan, R 1983 *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the*  
12 *Open Hearth to the Microwave*. New York  
13  
14 Crook, T. (2008) Putting matter in its right place: Dirt, time and regeneration in mid-  
15 Victorian Britain", *Journal of Victorian Culture* 13 (2) pp. 200-22  
16  
17 Denis J. et Pontille D. (2010) 'Placing Subway Signs. Practical Properties of Signs at  
18 Work', *Visual Communication*, vol 9 (4), p 441–62.  
19  
20 Douglas, M. (1988) *Purity and Danger: an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*.  
21 London: Ark Paperbacks.  
22  
23 Farias, I., Bender, T. (2010) *Urban assemblages. How Actor-Network changes Urban*  
24 *studies*, Routledge, New York.  
25  
26 Fincher, R and Jacobs, J (1998) *Cities of Difference* Guildford Press  
27  
28 Friedan, B. (1963) *Feminine Mystique* New York W.W. Norton  
29  
30 Gandy M. (1999) "The Paris Sewers and the Rationalization of Urban Space," *Transactions*  
31 *of the Institute of British Geographers* 24 pp. 23-44  
32  
33 Gandy, M. (2002) *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*, Cambridge:  
34 MIT Press.  
35  
36 Gender and Water Alliance. (2003) *Gender and Water Development Report*. Netherlands:  
37 Gender and Water Alliance.  
38  
39  
40 Graham, S., Marvin, S. (2001) *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures,*  
41 *Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition*, London: Routledge.  
42  
43 Habermas, J. (1991) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a*  
44 *Category of Bourgeois Society*, MIT Press.  
45  
46 Khan, Y. (2010) The Rise and Fall of the Launderette *BBC News magazine* August 10<sup>th</sup>.  
47  
48 Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror* New York: Columbia University Press  
49  
50 Latour, B. (1979) *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy Public Life of Things*,  
51 MIT Press  
52  
53 McFarlane, C, Desai, R. & Graham, S. (forthcoming) Informal Urban Sanitation: Everyday  
54 Life, Comparison and Poverty. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*.  
55  
56 Marres, N. and Lezaun, J. (2011) 'Materials and Devices of the Public' *An Introduction*  
57 *Economy & Society* 40 (4): 553–81.  
58  
59  
60



- Mayhew, H. (1861) *London Labour and the London Poor* Republished 2008 Hertford: Wandsworth Publications.
- Miller, D. (1987) *Material Culture and Mass Consumption Consumerism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Mitchell, D. (1963) *Starting a Self Service Laundry (Power Laundry and Cleaning news* (of which he is editor). London: Iliffe Technical Publications Ltd.
- Mohun, A. 1999 *Steam Laundries Gender Technology, and Work in the United States and Great Britain 1880- 1940* Baltimore: John Hopkins University press.
- Molotch, H. (2010) *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing* (edited with Laura Noren) New York University Press.
- Molotch, H. (2011) 'Objects in the City' in S. Bridge and S. Watson (eds) *The New Blackwell Companion to the City*, London: Blackwell.
- Moore, M. (2012) How to Do Laundry in the New York City' *Splice Today*.
- Museum of London Archives. <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Collections-Research/Research/Your-Research/X20L/Themes/1382/1202/>
- Oakley, A. (1972) *Sex, Gender and Society*. London: Temple Smith. Reprinted with a new Introduction, London: Gower, 1985
- Old and Interesting (2013) History of Domestic Paraphernalia  
<http://www.oldandinteresting.com>
- Pink, S. (2007) 'The Sensory Home as a Site of Consumption: Everyday Laundry Practices and the Production of Gender in E. Casey and L. Martens (eds) *Gender and Consumption: Domestic Cultures and the Commercialisation of Everyday Life* Aldershot : Ashgate. pp. 163- 181
- Sennett, R. (1990) *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*, New York: Norton.
- Sennett, R. (2010) The Public Realm in Bridge, G and Watson, S. (eds) *The Blackwell City Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Shove, E. (2003) *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organisation of Normality*, Oxford: Berg.
- Sibley, D. (1995) *Geographies of Exclusion Society and Difference in the West* London: Routledge
- Sidbury, J. (1997) *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* Cambridge University Press
- Southwark council  
[http://www.southwark.gov.uk/news/article/161/from\\_filthy\\_laundries\\_to\\_fresh\\_new\\_hidde](http://www.southwark.gov.uk/news/article/161/from_filthy_laundries_to_fresh_new_hidde)



1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

n\_homes

Wang, J. (2002) Gender, Race and Civilisation: The Competition between American Power  
Laundries and Chinese Steam Laundries 1870s -1920s. *American Studies*  
*International* February Vol. XL No 1. P. 52-73

Watson, S. (2006) *City Publics: the (dis)enchantments of urban encounters*, London and  
New York: Routledge.

Wilson, E. (1980) *Only Halfway to Paradise; Women in Post-War Britain 1945-1969*.  
London: Tavistock

Young, I. (1990) *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University  
Press.



112x141mm (72 x 72 DPI)

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



558x464mm (72 x 72 DPI)



225x169mm (72 x 72 DPI)

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

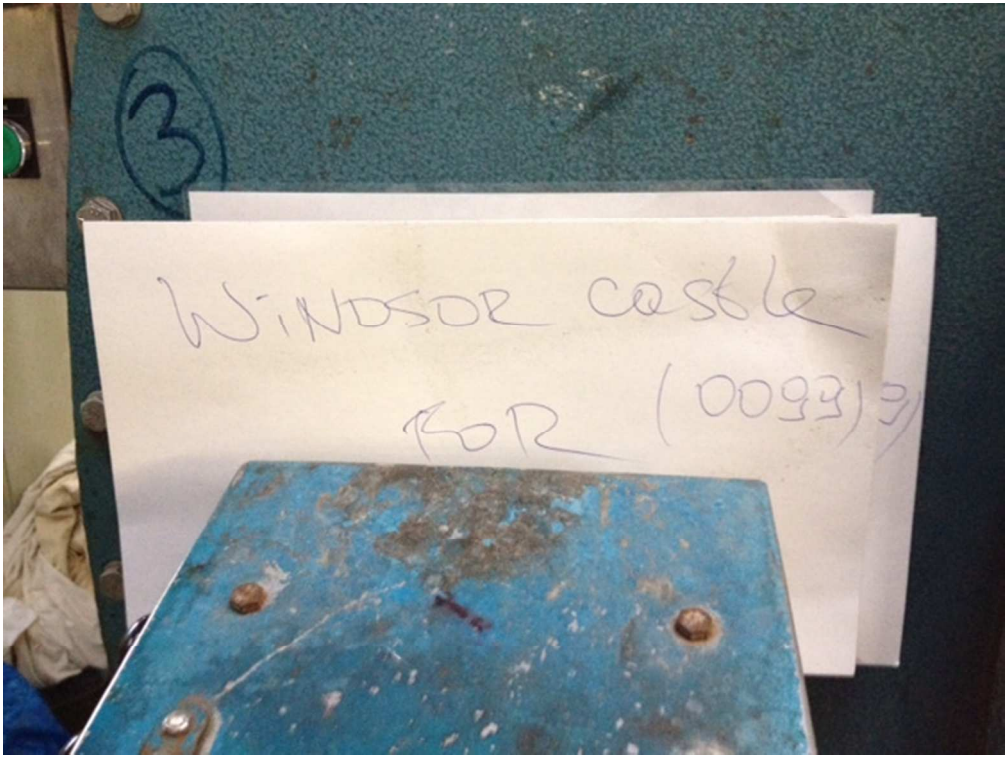


225x169mm (72 x 72 DPI)





225x169mm (72 x 72 DPI)



225x169mm (72 x 72 DPI)



225x169mm (72 x 72 DPI)



1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

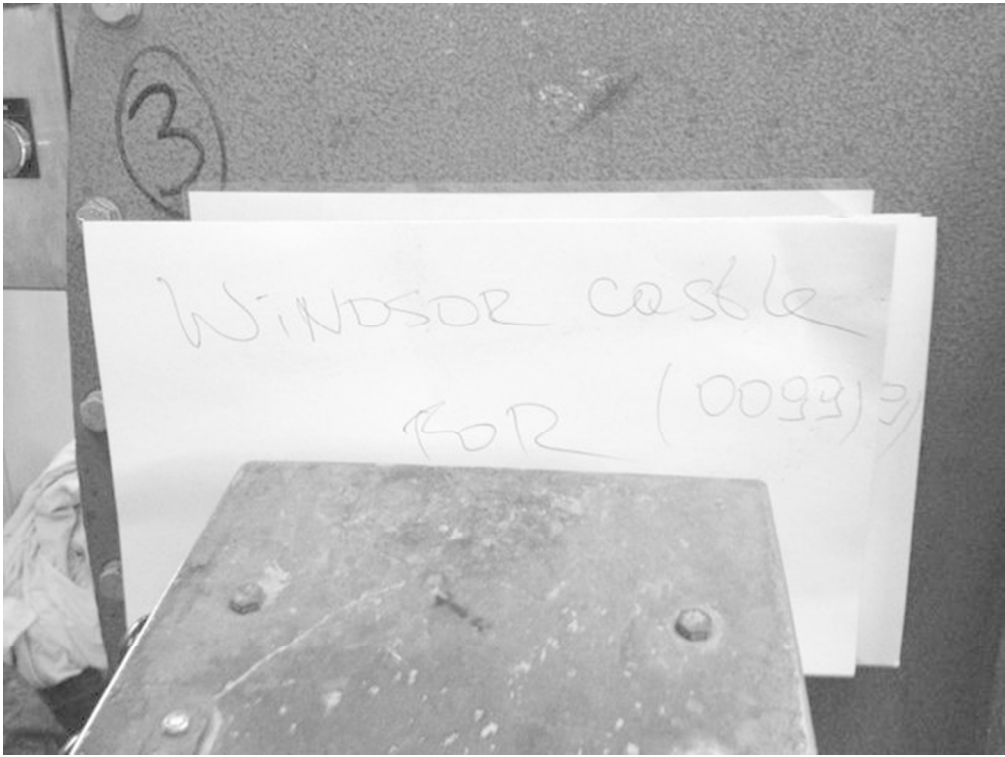


225x169mm (72 x 72 DPI)



225x169mm (72 x 72 DPI)

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



225x169mm (72 x 72 DPI)



225x169mm (72 x 72 DPI)

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

**Mundane objects in the city: laundry practices and the making and remaking of public/private sociality and space in London and New York.**

**Corresponding author:** Sophie Watson

**Contact details:**  
Open University  
Sociology  
Walton Hall  
Milton Keynes  
MK76AA  
United Kingdom  
Email: s.watson@open.ac.uk

**Co-authors:**  
**none**

**Paper received, March 2013; accept, March 2014**